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United States Department of Agriculture

Update on Water Quality



Progress Update #12

January/February 1992

First WQIP Signups Held in February

In February, farmers and ranchers in existing Hydrologic Unit Areas, Water Quality Demonstration Projects, and 1991 Water Quality Special Projects began signing up for technical assistance through Water Quality Incentive Projects (WQIP).

Before the signups began, the three U.S. Department of Agriculture agencies cooperating to carry out the new program, ASCS, ES and SCS, held five joint teleconferences between national program leaders and state and local water quality project managers to answer questions on WQIP.

Funded through ASCS's Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP), WQIP is part of the Water Quality Incentive Program authorized by the Food, Agriculture, Conservation and Trade Act of 1990. The goal is source reduction of agricultural pollutants by use of environmentally and economically sound management practices.

Water Quality Projects Assessed

Three multiagency committees recently heard the University of Nebraska's assessment of the organization and implementation of USDA's eight FY 1990-94 water quality demonstration projects. Findings and recommendations from the assessment by Kay Rockwell and De Lynn Hay, et al, have already been used to improve the Water Quality Demonstration Projects initiated in FY 90 and FY 91.

USDA Looks Anew At Atrazine; USGS, EPA Complete Team Review

Atrazine, a corn herbicide that is widely used in the Upper Midwest, has come under careful review over the past 3 months. USDA's Working Group on Water Quality Policy Advisory Committee requested a review of both policy and programs that relate to the herbicide.

This action was prompted by a U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) interim report by Donald Goolsby, entitled "Distribution of Selected Herbicides and Nitrate in the Mississippi River and Its Major Tributaries, April Through June 1991." Goolsby reported his findings in a public briefing held at USDA, November 20, 1991.

Atrazine was detected in all 146 samples collected in April, May, and June 1991, with median concentrations ranging from 0.29 parts per billion (ppb) to 3.2 ppb. The Environmental Protection Agency's Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) was exceeded at five of the eight sampling sites: White River, IN; Illinois River, IL; Platte River, NE; Missouri River at Hermann, MO; and the Mississippi River at Thebes, MO.

WQIP incentive payments will be for integrated crop management and other management practices such as waste utilization, contour farming, conservation tillage, nutrient management, and similar cultural practices. Although they may be a part of the Water Quality Resource Management Plan, structural practices such as terraces, waterways, animal waste storage facilities, irrigation systems, ponds, and other similar practices, will not be eligible for WQIP incentive payments. However, they could be cost shared with regular ACP funds or other cost share programs.

For more information, contact Dan Smith, Soil Conservation Service, at (202) 720-3524, Mike Linsenbigler, Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, at (202) 690-0224, or Francis Thicke, Extension Service, at (202) 720-5369.

The complete report was sent to State Extension Directors, State Administrators of the Soil Conservation and Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Services, and to the 74 nonpoint hydrologic units across the United States. For further information, or additional copies of the report, contact Claude Bennett, Extension Service, USDA, at 202-690-4550.

Following the presentation, the Policy Advisory Committee, which includes representatives from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Corps of Engineers, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), and USDA agencies including the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS), Cooperative State Research Service (CSRS), Economic Research Service (ERS), Extension Service (ES), National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), and the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), established two work groups, one to review policy questions, and a second to review technical issues presented by the USGS findings.

These work groups reported their initial findings at a February 4 Policy Advisory Committee meeting. Additional review is underway to consider what further steps should be taken to programmatically address this matter.

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Atrazine was first registered for United States use in 1958. More than 80 percent of the annual usage (53.3 million pounds) is on corn. It also is used on sorghum, sugar cane, macadamia nut and guava trees, Christmas tree plantations, and on non-cropped industrial lands.

More than 70 percent of the atrazine usage is concentrated in 10 Midwest states. Nearly 25 percent of the atrazine used in those 10 states is applied by farmers in Illinois and Nebraska, with

another 25 percent applied by farmers in Indiana, Iowa, and Kansas.

The Safe Drinking Water Act, administered by EPA, requires that maximum contaminant levels (MCL) be established for drinking water. The MCL for atrazine, promulgated on January 30, 1991, is 3 parts per billion. EPA regulations require public drinking water suppliers to begin monitoring for atrazine in January 1993. For additional information, contact Fred Swader, WGQ, (202) 720-4751.

Area Study Sites Set By ERS

ERS and NASS recently completed selection of Area Study survey sites. Each site corresponds to a National Water Quality Assessment Study Unit established by the USGS.

Newly selected sites include the Mississippi Embayment (MS, LA, AR, TN, KY, MO); San Joaquin-Tulare (CA); Southern Arizona (AZ); Southern High Plains (TX, NM); and Red River of the North (MN, ND).

Studies to be conducted this year include the Albemarle-Pamlico Drainage (NC, VA); Southern Georgia (GA, FL); Iowa-Illinois (IA, MN, IL); and Upper Snake River Basin (ID, WY, NV).

Area studies started in 1991 included Central Nebraska (NE); White River Basin (IN); Lower Susquehanna Basin (PA, MD); and Mid-Columbia Basin (WA).

For additional information, contact Bob Kellogg, ERS, (202) 219-0403.

Soil Testing, Nitrate Usage Issues Emerge From Workshop

Participants in a recent Nitrogen Workshop made suggestions for an expanded research program in soil testing and a position paper on the level of nitrate needed in the soil for economical production of crops.

Workshop participants included representatives from ARS, ES, SCS, EPA, the Nitrogen Action Committee (EPA and USDA), and scientists from five CSRS regional research committees.

The Soil Testing Research Program will address improvements in present tests for nitrogen availability to crops; development of new tests, as

needed, to assess the impacts of nitrates on water quality; integration of soil tests into farm-scale nitrogen recommendation systems, and development or improvement of tests to determine excess nitrate and the leaching potential at the end of the crop production system. Funding was identified to initiate new or enhance ongoing research programs.

The position paper on nitrogen is targeted for completion in April.

For additional information contact, Maurice Horton, CSRS, (202) 401-4504.

The Hidden Benefits of Water Quality Programs

An often overlooked benefit of a Federal program is attracting private sources to water quality projects with a high probability of success.

The nonpoint hydrologic unit areas (HUA), in Ohio are one case in point. One area received an additional \$300,000 in funding from an environmental organization, and \$100,000 from a major industry in the watershed. In another, the EPA participated in the purchase of \$500,000 worth of conservation equipment for demonstration purposes.

A California HUA project attracted 30 growers who committed 13,034 acres to improved practices. Cooperating agencies expanded to include the California Departments of Fish and Game, Food and Agriculture, and Regional Water Quality Control Board; the Center for Irrigation Technology and Engineering Institutes, both at California State University, Fresno; three local water districts; ARS; the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and the Lemoore Naval Air Station. This HUA has attracted in excess of \$200,000 in funding from non-HUA sources.

Nitrate Occurrence In U.S. Waters

Copies of the USDA's Working Group on Water Quality publication "Nitrate Occurrence In U.S. Waters" remain available following initial distribution to Federal and state agencies, as well

as organizations in the private sector. For additional information, contact John Fedkiw, OBPA, (202) 720-7963.



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